



**Department of  
Veterans Affairs**

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# **Fact Sheet**

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## **How A VA National Cemetery Is Created**

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) creates a new national cemetery through a six-step process. Each step requires that congressionally approved funds are available. The steps are: site selection, environmental assessment, land acquisition, master planning and design development, preparation of construction documents and construction. The development, eventual operation and maintenance of the cemetery are the responsibility of VA's National Cemetery Administration.

### **Site Selection**

VA identifies a geographic area with a large veteran population unserved by a national or state veterans cemetery. The cemetery's size and number of gravesites will be determined by demographic forecasts. VA canvases the area for sites of the size needed and evaluates their suitability for cemetery development.

Criteria for site selection include: accessibility, available utilities and water, surrounding land use, soil, topography and shape, aesthetic appearance and restrictions to development, including factors such as the presence of endangered species, mineral rights or easements. Good roads should be nearby and provide minimal travel time from population hubs. Adequate water for irrigation is important. Adjacent areas should not be noisy or unsightly. Level to rolling terrain is best, but some slope is desirable to permit drainage.

Two to five sites are identified and advance to the next step in the process.

### **Environmental Assessment**

To comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, the top sites are assessed to determine the impact of a cemetery on the environment. An environmental assessment document is prepared, identifying VA's preferred site. The assessment must result in a "finding of no significant impact" for the site to be considered. After receiving a positive finding, VA makes the results available to the public for a 30-day comment period. After that, VA officials make a final recommendation to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, who decides whether to acquire the property.

### **Land Acquisition**

In some instances, land is donated to VA. In other cases, federal and state agencies transfer property to VA at no cost. Otherwise, land is purchased at the fair market value established by a real-property appraisal. Before the final sales contract is signed, the Department of Justice, acting on VA's behalf, reviews all documents to ensure that the contract and title meet all requirements for a legal transfer of ownership.

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### **Master Planning and Design Development**

Once VA takes title to the land, it solicits bids from architectural and engineering (A/E) firms and contracts with one to design the new cemetery. The A/E firm prepares a master plan for developing all phases of the cemetery, and follows with a more detailed design for the first phase of construction. The first phase usually includes the first active burial section and the required infrastructure to operate the cemetery. Later phases generally include new burial sections and associated infrastructure. Typically, each phase of construction is designed to provide burial space for 10 years.

### **Construction Document Preparation**

Under a second negotiated contract, the A/E firm prepares plans and specifications that detail all aspects of phase-one construction: active burial sections, administrative and maintenance buildings, public information center, committal shelters, roads and other infrastructure. These documents provide the basis for contractors to bid on constructing the project.

### **Construction Award and Completion**

Finally, VA solicits bids and awards a contract for construction of the new cemetery. The process takes about four months; actual construction of phase one takes about 24 months.

Land purchases and construction require multiple congressional appropriations, over several years' budgets, to complete each phase. In total, site selection, environmental assessment, master planning, design and phase-one construction require about five years to complete.

One of VA's goals is to provide veterans reasonable access to burial options. VA considers reasonable access to mean that a veteran or spouse can have a casketed or cremation burial in a national or state veterans cemetery within 75 miles of home. Experience and recent data show that more than 80 percent of persons interred in national cemeteries lived within 75 miles of the cemetery when they died.

To achieve that goal, VA builds new national cemeteries where veterans do not already have access. VA also manages the State Cemetery Grants Program, which encourages states to build veterans cemeteries in unserved areas. The number of veterans within 75 miles of a national or state veterans cemetery with available burial space has increased from 65 percent in 1995 to 83 percent today. In 2009, 89 percent of veterans will have that access.

VA has built six new national cemeteries since 1997 and is currently constructing five new ones. It is also increasing the long-term burial capacity of existing national cemeteries by acquiring adjacent land, building columbaria for cremated remains where feasible, and using designs that maximize the space available.

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